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CIA admitted failure in mind-control studies, author says

By Norman Kempster
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WASHINGTON — The CIA sponsored scientific research into methods of controlling the human mind for almost 10 years after it ended its previously disclosed experiments with the hallucinogen LSD in 1963, author John Marks says in a new book.

Citing documents released by the agency under the Freedom of Information Act, Marks, a former State Department intelligence officer, said the CIA continued — at least until mid-1972 — to search for exotic ways to dominate the brain and control behavior.

The agency eventually admitted that its experimentation, which began in 1950 in the midst of the Cold War, had been a failure. The human mind was either too resilient or too unpredictable to be molded with the reliability required for espionage operations.

The book, "The Search for The Manchurian Candidate," quotes a CIA document as saying that the mind-control programs finally ended July 10, 1972, when the chief of the project, Dr. Sidney Gottlieb, wrote its bureaucratic epitaph.

"The Clandestine Service has been able to maintain contact with the leading edge of developments in the field of biological and chemical control of human behavior," Gottlieb wrote.

"It has become increasingly obvious over the last several years that this general area had less and less relevance to current clandestine operations ... On the scientific side, it has become very clear that these materials and techniques are too unpredictable in their effect on individual human beings, under specific circumstances, to be operationally useful. Our operations officers ... have shown a discerning and perhaps commendable distaste for utilizing these materials and techiques."

The materials and techniques included LSD and a wide variety of other mind-altering drugs, sexual entrapment, electric shock, electrodes implanted in the brain, and radiation hypnosis.

The objectives were to develop a foolproof truth serum to be used in questioning agents, defectors and enemy prisoners; to determine if brainwashing was possible; to devise ways of producing amnesia so that agents could not reveal secrets if captured, and to develop a variety of ways of killing and incapaciting enemies.

In 1975, the public got its first glimpse of the mind-control program, once the CIA's deepest secret, when a commission headed by the late Vice President Nelson Rockefeller reported that an unnamed Army civilian employe — since identified as Dr. Frank Olson — had committed suicide in 1953 after having been given LSD without his knowledge.

The Rockefeller report provided no details, but in the last three years additional information has seeped out. In his book, Marks pulls the story together, showing for the first time its scope, placing previous revelations in context and filling in some of the blanks.

He reports, for example, that in the 1960s, Dr. James Hamilton, a San Francisco psychiatrist, received CIA funds to conduct "clinical testing of behavioral control materials" on inmates at the California Medical Facility at Vacaville. Although the records do not indicate the precise nature of the experiments, they show that Hamilton spent more than $10,000 in CIA funds to pay volunteers during 1967 and 1968. At prison pay scales, that means he probably experimented on between 400 and 1,000 inmates.